Rome News-Tribune

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PCBs cross the line

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Where the property of West Central Elementary School ends, a hazardous waste site begins. They're separated by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire, but connected by a drainage ditch that carried a probable human carcinogen.

More than any place in Rome, this property line contrasts what has and has not been done to investigate and eliminate at least 25 years of known contamination from polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

On one side of the fence is the closed General Electric Medium Transformers plant where PCBs were used as an insulating fluid in transformers from 1963 to 1977. The facility is a hazardous waste site regulated by the state Environmental Protection Division (EPD) under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) since the mid-1980s.

On the other side of the fence is a dense and overgrown wooded area, the back yard of West Central Elementary School.

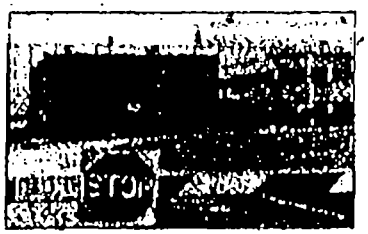
Recent tests by the federal Environmental Protection Agency indicate low levels of PCBs at an undisclosed location on school property.

About half of the property on the GE side of the boundary line is free from PCB contamination and ready for industrial development, the company says, because it voluntarily excavated along the drainage ditch, removing soil and sediment containing PCBs.

A 200-foot clearing as wide as an interstate shows the path of the cleanup. It follows the ditch on GE property, then stops like an unfinished road at the fence. On the other side is West Central Elementary School. Because it was volun-

Please see PCBs 5A

GE Rome



SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS

This is part two of a series examining chemical contamination from the General Electric Medium Transformers plant in Rome.

Today: PCBs in Soils

GE Rome

SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS

Kevin Cnaffe / Rome News-Tribune

General Electric excavated a swath along a ditch, then stopped at the property line of West Central Elementary School. Shown here is the view from the school property.

PCBs cross the line

from 1A

tary, GE was not required to continue its project farther downstream.

Rome school officials were told in 1996 that contamination at West Central Elementary School and West End Elementary School, which also is in the path of one of four GE drainage ditches, was barely detectable or not present at all. What they weren't told was that more tests were needed.

GE collected eight soil samples from West Central in 1998 and detected no PCBs, but eight is not enough, state regulators say.

"I would not consider the testing to be exhaustive and what is necessary compared to what is going to be done," said Jim Ussery, program manager of EPD's Hazardous Waste Branch.

Some of the dirt from the massive ground moving operation at GE's property was so contaminated that no landfill in Georgia could legally accept it. Heavily contaminated soil was hauled to a special landfill hundreds of miles away in Emelle, Ala. The majority of the dirt, however, had lower levels of contamination and was deposited at a landfill in Ball Ground, Ga.

Tests collected after the cleanup showed the project was a success. PCB concentrations on the undeveloped property that GE owns — approximately 118 acres of the 236 acre facility — dropped below the state's reportable level of 1.55 parts per million (ppm), said Richard Lester, plant manager who oversees cleanup at the GE facility. (ppm measures the amount of PCBs in a million parts of soil.)

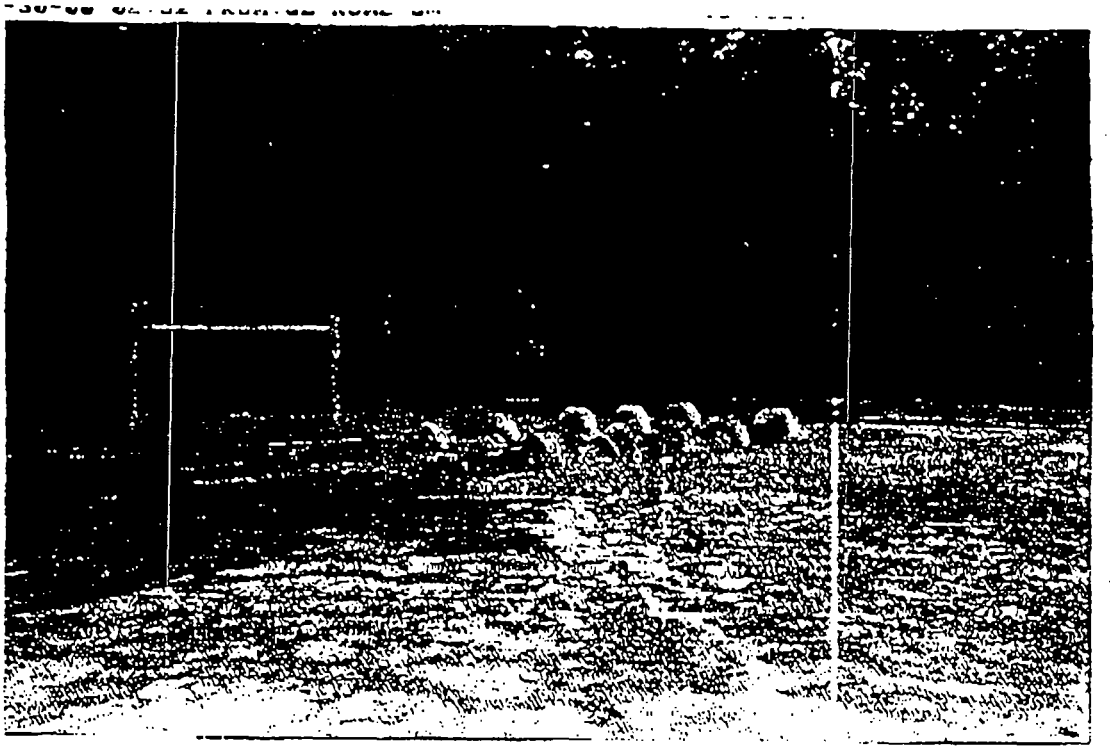
More than 3,000 samples of soil and sediment were collected during the cleanup. Fewer than a dozen samples have been taken over the years at West Central Elementary School since the GE plant became a hazardous waste site.

State regulators say more testing is needed

"Since it is unlikely that soil/sediment contamination stopped at the property line, EPD or GE needs to take soil and sediment samples downstream of the GE property line," Bob Pierce, a veteran geologist with the EPD, wrote almost a year ago.

In a Dec. 20, 1999, memo Pierce warned that PCBs were detected in a groundwater monitoring well on GE property near West Central Elementary School. His memo concluded, "It is not known if we are looking at isolated instances of contamination or just the tip of the iceberg."

It is still unknown. More monitoring away from the manufacturing facility is needed, says the EPD and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.



Kevin Quaile / Rome News-Tribune

The playground at West Central Elementary School abuts a woods. The ground slopes downward through the woods to the drainage ditch flowing from GE property a few hundred feet away.

which is conducting an Expanded Site Investigation of migration pathways to the Coosa River. Full results from the testing were unavailable at the time of this report. However, officials did confirm a 7 ppm reading at West Central. EPA would not say how many tests were taken there or from where on the property the samples came.

Through an independent environmental consulting firm, EPA in the 1980s investigated migration of PCBs through drainage ways into the Coosa River. The consulting firm reported that regulatory action at the Coosa should fall under federal superfund laws and not the state-run RCRA program. EPA disagreed, and the site remains under state regulation.

Initial testing does not always show the extent of contamination. Outside of the manufacturing facility, the highest concentration of PCBs that have been found is 7,010 ppm. It was discovered along an old drainage way at the now closed Lowe's Building Supply property. The property is southwest of the GE plant off Redmond Circle and shares a drainage ditch with the plant that empties into Horseleg Creek. Lowe's is suing GE because of

Lowe's discovered the high concentration while conducting its own tests. Initial tests at the Lowe's property were relatively low. The company took 16 soil samples in 1995, and the highest concentration was 8.3 ppm. It wasn't until 1999, after the company had taken many more samples and located a previously unknown drainage pathway, that the high reading of 7,010 ppm was found.

GE officials say this high concentration was discovered beneath a paved parking lot and does not pose a public health risk. GE also has questioned the accuracy of some testing done at Lowe's.

Children may be more sensitive to pollutants

Research shows that children may be more sensitive to pollutants than adults.

A recent article entitled "Kids at Risk" published in the June 19, 2000, issue of U.S. News said studies suggest that extremely low levels of chemicals like PCBs and mercury could affect the developing human brain.

Upset by the lack of testing, especially at the schools, some state regulators are speaking out. "We asked them to do it," EPD geologist Pierce said.

"They (GE) stopped at the fence, and it's not rocket science to figure out... You can go to the fence and look at it. Beyond the fence, nothing has been done. You need to go beyond the fence, but they say that is a RCRA issue," he said.

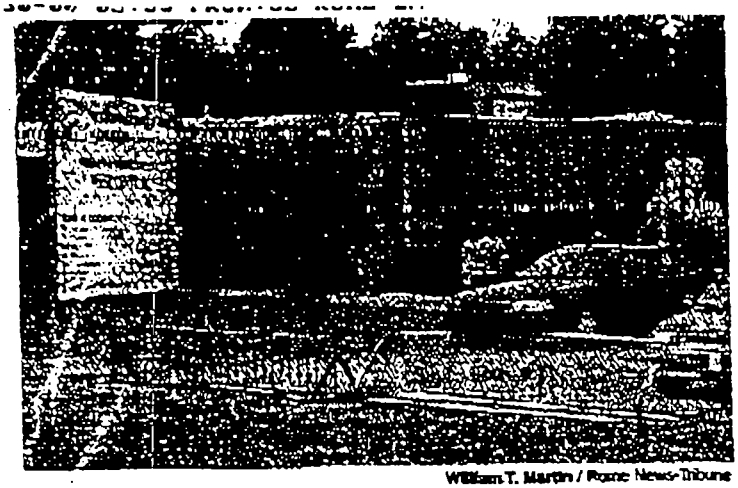
In other words, GE will do it if the state orders it, then enforces the order.

Parents of children who attend or have attended West Central Elementary School should be concerned but not alarmed, insists the EPD. "I think they should be concerned about children playing in a drainage area downstream from an industrial facility," Ussery of the EPD said. At West Central Elementary, the playground borders a wooded area through which the ditch flows.

At West Central Elementary, parts of a another ditch meander through the playground itself.

According to the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Control (ATSDR), children can absorb small amounts of PCBs through their skin if they come in contact with the substance or ingest contaminated soil. Food contamination, however, is the most likely route of exposure in children and adults.

"Children who live near haz-



William T. Martin / Rome News-Tribune

School lets out last week at West Central Elementary School, southeast of GE property. EPD recommends more testing at this school and at West End Elementary School, southwest of the plant.

ardous waste sites may be exposed by playing at these sites and touching and eating soil that contains PCBs... Children who live near hazardous waste sites should be discouraged from playing in the dirt near these sites and should not play in areas where there was a transformer fire. In addition, children should be discouraged from eating dirt, and careful hand washing practices should be followed," the ATSDR's toxicological profile for PCBs says.

4 drainage ditches carried PCBs off site

Historically, PCBs migrated from the GE manufacturing facility through one of four drainage ditches or through the city's sewer system. Two of the drainage ditches flowed into Little Dry Creek and two flowed into Horseleg Creek. All eventually emptied into the Coosa River, the first river in Georgia where commercial fishing was banned because of contamination by PCBs. The ban went into effect in 1976 and remains today.

Between 1953, when the GE manufacturing plant opened, and 1969, when it first connected to the Rome sewer treatment plant, untreated raw sewage saturated with PCBs may have been piped directly into Little Dry Creek, which spills into the Oostanaula River and then dumps into the Coosa River.

GE says the raw sewage emptied directly into the Coosa River, not the creek, but city officials from the time say the untreated sewage was piped into the creek by way of the drainage ditches.

The former superintendent of the Rome waste treatment facility recalls it clearly. Before 1965 sludge from GE went into Little Dry Creek without any treatment, Jim Fincher says.

Little Dry Creek spills into the Oostanaula across the river and about 50 feet downstream from the city's water intake supply. EPD reports that sediment taken at the intake valve in 1974 showed low levels of PCBs. More recent tests have detected no PCBs.

Sediment tests from 1976 show that the highest concentrations of PCBs in drainage ditches were found at the south fork of Little Dry Creek near Woodbine Ave. The highest reading at the time was 101 ppm.

"It doesn't sound like that is a sewer kind of thing to me," GE's Lester said of the 1976 findings, "because in the sewer line you could actually get pure PCBs traveling from the plant into wherever it discharged, which I believe is the river. I would think the level would be higher than the highest thing found here."

Humphrey Hiers may have been a dredging project at Little Dry Creek during the late 1960s or early 1970s that would have decreased the concentrations before the 1976 tests.

Floyd County Commissioner Garry Fricks grew up on Woodbine Avenue. The creek ran through and occasionally flooded his backyard. It was Fricks' playground.

"We would build dams in it," he said. "We would take a shovel and boards and try to build a dam. That was how we entertained ourselves. I would have felt left out if we didn't have a creek in our backyard because back then people didn't have swimming pools."

Childhood playmates struck 'Texas Tea'

It was common, Fricks said, for him and his neighborhood friends to strike what he described as "Texas Tea," a thick layer of oil embedded in the creek bottom and banks. Although Fricks has no way of identifying the substance, PCBs are an oil based liquid and they are known to be in the creek entombed in sediment or soil.

"The soil would stink and would be saturated with oil," Fricks recalled. "Then as we dug down we would find big pockets of what looked like oil. Our joke was that we had struck oil."

Fricks remembers a tractor with a bucket broadening the drainage ditch when he was a teenager, between the late 1960s and early 1970s. "This thing went from a drainage ditch to a twenty foot wide channel," Fricks said. "We would go and watch them dig it every day. It was a big event when you had something like that happen in your back yard."

The Rome News-Tribune could find no records of a channel widening project at Little Dry Creek, and several Rome city officials from the time could not recall such a project.

Because PCBs are a probable carcinogen, Commissioner Fricks questions if the chemicals' presence might explain a rash of cancers in his home and neighborhood. His father had prostate cancer and was

cancer. His mother died of a rare cancer that killed her days after she was diagnosed. A next-door-neighbor who often played with Fricks in the creek died of brain cancer.

PCBs have been detected — predominantly in small concentrations — along Little Dry Creek and Horseleg Creek where they have been discovered at residential neighborhoods, parks, commercial properties, two elementary schools and at the former West Rome Jr. High and High School, which is at present day Wal-Mart.

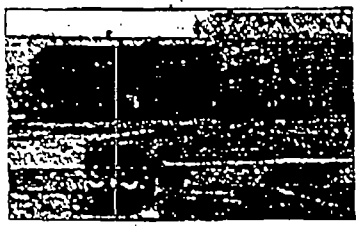
PCBs were detected in very low concentrations in 1996 under a swingset at West End Elementary School. Four samples were taken.

The hazardous waste was detected this year in elevated concentrations at Tolbert Park near where a sewer line intersects with Little Dry Creek. Of 36 locations sampled, three were above the 1.55 ppm notification limit. Concentrations ranged from non-detectable to 38 ppm, the EPD says.

GE voluntarily removed soil from the three areas. It was the first time GE had voluntarily removed soil not on its manufacturing facility, and although the EPD says testing at Tolbert Park was not extensive, children were seen playing in the creek less than a week after the removal.

Another area of high contamination is a vacant parcel between Lowe's and Wal-Mart. Much of the land is owned by GE, which purchased the property from the Trust Company.

GE Rome



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COMING TUESDAY
PCBs Spread In Sludge

Bank demanded GE buy the property after it discovered concentrations of 2,530 ppm and 610 ppm.

"Because the GE facility is clearly responsible for the PCBs and other contaminants detected at the property on March 1, 1995, we sent a letter to the GE facility demanding that the General Electric Company either remediate or purchase the property," an attorney for the bank informed the EPD in a letter dated March 5, 1995.

The Georgia Corporation owns land adjoining the Trust Company property. Concentrations ranging from 3,135 ppm and 2,870 ppm were detected there.

Lowe's, the Trust Company and Georgia Corporation share a drainage ditch with Wal-Mart and West End Elementary School. Two samples from a drainage ditch at the Wal-Mart property showed concentrations of 7.5 ppm and 9.3 ppm.

Before the Wal-Mart site was graded, the city of Rome took soil samples there and found a concentration of 20 ppm. A record of this was never filed with the EPD.

Little sediment data is available on the Coosa River. The few reports that there are show recent levels below 12.1 ppm at Mayo's Bar Lock and Dam. But Richard Lester of GE says more testing could be done.

"We really had to look hard for this," he said, as he alluded to a chart that demonstrated a downward trend of PCBs in sediment in the Coosa River. The information was hard to find, he said, because there wasn't much of it. "Again I think its indicative of the low levels they (the EPD) have found," he said. "They haven't gone back and done extensive sampling on a regular basis."

Of the river sediment samples, none are deep core samples, Jim Ussery of the EPD said. Deep core samples enable the EPD to see what the PCB concentrations are several feet below the first layer of sediment, and they would help the agency date the heaviest periods of contamination.

"That is something we would like to do," Ussary said. "I think everybody feels the PCBs are there, that it has sort of been encapsulated as new sediment covers it over."

understanding of contamination away from the manufacturing facility — in drainage ditches, creeks, rivers and groundwater — Ussery said, "Currently at GE there is insufficient information for us to conclude that there is no human exposures or that there is no groundwater contamination off-site." EPD officials could not estimate how long it would take them to determine the extent of human exposure or groundwater contamination.

GE says it will clean up off-site contamination

Commercial property owners near the GE manufacturing plant with contaminated soil have been informed that GE assumes responsibility, said Stephen Ramsey, vice-president of corporate environmental programs at GE.

"We have told them that the investigation costs and cleanup costs fall on us unless we find something that either they've done or contamination that doesn't come from our property," Ramsey said. "To the extent that we are talking about PCBs and other material that came from our plant site, I think everyone knows who has property around here that we are assuming responsibility for them."

ABOUT GE

Name: General Electric Co.

Incorporated: 1892

Chairman & CEO: John F. Welch Jr. since 1980.

Products: Appliances, lighting products, industrial automation products, medical diagnostic imaging equipment, motors, electrical distribution and control equipment, locomotives, power generation and delivery products, nuclear power support services and fuel assemblies, commercial and military aircraft jet engines, and engineered materials such as plastics, silicones and superabrasive industrial diamonds.

Other businesses: Communications services, television, including NBC, and financial services.

Medium Transformers plant in Rome: Opened in 1952. Used PCBs from 1953 to 1977. Closed in 1998. Listed as a hazardous waste facility and is regulated by the state Environmental Protection Division under the Resource and Conservation Recovery Act (RCRA).

Law firm: GE Rome is represented in its cleanup activity by the law firm of King and Spalding, of which former Sen. Sam Nunn is a partner. In 1997 after serving in the U.S. Senate for 25 years, Nunn walked away from politics. That same year, he was named to the GE board of directors, which has 16 members, and GE Rome announced its manufacturing operation was closing. Nunn is also a director of The Coca Cola Company, Dell Computer Corporation, Internet Security Systems Group Inc., National Service Industries Inc., Scientific-Atlanta Inc., Texaco Inc. and Total System Services Inc.